

Ethic's Askew: A Case Study Of Ethics In An Educational Environment

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ABSTRACT

For a formal definition of ethics, Webster's New World Dictionary (1995) defines the term as "the study of standards of conduct and moral judgment". Ethics is important to individuals because we are concerned with what leaders do and who they are—their conduct and character. "Conduct" is a word that implies behavior. Behavior can change under differing circumstances. For instance, in a "low key", unstressed situation, most individuals tend to be civil and polite; however, the introduction of stress factored into a scenario can totally change the dynamics of the situation, as well as the ability of those involved to "cope". Stress can cause individuals to become hostile, rebellious, and oftentimes uncompromising. Stress introduced into a situation can also cause individuals to become unethical. For example, take natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina in 2005 whereby individuals were under tremendous stress of discomfort from not having a clean environment in which to live, as well as conditions of hunger and thirst from lack of food and fresh water. Most of us have witnessed the television footage of the "looting" that occurred from these conditions. Or take the civil unrest that occurred in the streets of Los Angeles after the verdict of 1992 when police officers were acquitted of the beating of an African American named Rodney King. Again, anger and stress caused looting and violence to erupt in the streets. While these are "extreme" situations, the question arises as to how individuals cope with stress in an atmosphere where civility is taught and encouraged. For instance, consider a classroom situation where an assignment to produce an outcome is given with few rules, and the members of the group are from other classes, possibly even in other states. The means of communication for these individuals are e-mail, a relatively new virtual reality website, similar to face book, or telephone should one choose to use that method. This type of situation would most likely exist in a graduate program and in fact, did. This paper is a case study of just that type of situation.

Keywords: Ethics, Education, Case Study

BACKGROUND

According to Husu (2001), "Previous research on ethical dilemmas in teaching reveals that most teachers are not always aware of the moral impact of their actions." He goes on to discuss the fact that teachers are often not prepared to deal with moral situations that arise in the teaching environment. Additionally, they should evaluate the consequences of their actions. Husu refers to the decision they are making in their teaching process as "normative" decisions. This phrase is used because he regards "professional ethics" as dealing with "norms, values, and principles that should govern the conduct of educational professions" (Husu, 2001).

Teachers have a variety of obligations within their profession. They must plan curriculum, distribute assignment, grade those assignments and evaluate the performance of the students. In addition, they must deal with students who may be "naïve and vulnerable", and teachers also have to deal with discipline issues, often making subjective decisions (Husu, 2001). With these obligations in mind, Husu contends that "the normative cores of professional ethics, therefore, provides various ways to appraise the merits and to judge the significance of educational practices taking place in schools."

The concept of moral appears to be the umbrella of ethical decision making. According to McCadden (1998), “morality can be defined as an active process by which individuals come to understanding and meanings relating to social interactions.” Husu (2001) added to this statement that the values that students have learned from teachers, parents, and peers reinforce a student’s concept of morality and ethical values. However, articles recently written contend that ethical behavior is beyond being taught in schools, especially graduate programs (Carruth, et.al., 1991). Carruth goes on to address a recent survey given to undergraduate students in which 71% as opposed to 11% believed ethical decisions could be taught in school (Carruth, et.al., 1991).

While the current authors contend that teaching ethics in the classroom is a “noble” cause. Should not instructors be aware of the nature of their assignments, combined with some knowledge of the stress related issues that students are undergoing on a daily basis? Dr. Frederick L. Patry (1935), a psychiatrist at the state education department of New York recently wrote on the mental hygiene of students by saying:

Since we are interested in the total personality functioning of the individual in his social and environmental setting, let us observe any one of you in your daily college life and note your objective behavior over a 24-hour period. You will immediately note that your reactions vary to different situational demands, such as recitations, pleasurable occasions, disappointment in academic ratings, social rebuffs, sickness, or demands made upon you by home or social obligations. Consciously or subconsciously you measure your fellow students by the manner in which they react to these ever-changing environmental demands and opportunities.

Two interesting points from this statement must be accentuated. First, students react to “different situational demands.” Depending on the stress level of a student and the amount of tolerance, any individual student will react in various ways. Some may have an outward verbal (in extreme cases, physical) reaction to stress, while other students will internalize the situation, perhaps even ignoring it.

The following paper analyzes students’ perspective of an actual assignment that was given to one of the authors in their graduate program. The authors can discern the issues related to the assignment and the stressful situation it created for the students involved; however, they wanted to obtain a student perception of what would be stressful to them and determine if the assignment would be appropriate at an undergraduate level. In conclusion, suggestions are given for teachers in proposing assignments to students, as well ways that students can maintain healthy “mental hygiene” while under enormous stress their school environment.

METHODOLOGY

Business students represented the population of interest. From a small public university in a southeastern state, a convenience sample of eight business courses was selected. From a captive population of 158 students, 122 questionnaires were collected, none of which was rejected for lack of completion of other concerns. This provided an effective response rate of 77.2%. Students were informed about the purpose of the study, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Proper research procedures were applied to assure the students’ anonymity, to maintain the privacy of the information, and to avoid duplications in participation. Classificatory questions were used to be able to evaluate potential differences between the participants.

Table 1
Sample Characteristics

Description	Gender	Classification	Emphasis
Male	56%		
Female	44%		
Freshman		0%	
Sophomore		1%	
Junior		27%	
Senior		72%	
Accounting			17%
Economic/Finance			8%
Health Care Management			21%
Management/Marketing			51%
Other			3%

Table I shows the characteristics of the students who completed the survey. Of the students surveyed, 56 percent were male, and 44 percent were female. There were no freshmen surveyed, while 1 percent were sophomores; 27 percent were juniors; and 72 percent were seniors. Of the business students surveyed, 17 percent had an accounting emphasis; 8 percent had an economics/finance emphasis; 21 percent health care management emphasis; 51 percent management/marketing emphasis; and 3 percent had other majors.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

In Table II, the Project Assignment Perception Evaluation used a Five point Likert Scale ranging from Strong Agreement to Strong Disagreement to measure the level of student perception related to statements concerning the case. The following is an analysis of questions regarding the ethical aspects of the case. The questions pertaining to communication will be evaluated in a subsequent analysis.

Sixty-nine percent of the students surveyed strongly disagreed that the project was planned out carefully by the instructors. Poor planning can often lead to poor communication, followed by stress which results in students becoming angry and intolerant of others. Intolerance and apathy can result in poor ethical decisions.

Table II
Project Assignment Perception Evaluation

Statements	Levels of Agreement				
	SA	A	N	D	SD
1. The project was well planned and prepared by the instructors.	2%	3%	6%	20%	69%
2. Project objectives and/or materials were clearly developed by the instructors.	1%	9%	7%	34%	49%
3. The students received adequate instructions.	0%	7%	13%	33%	47%
4. Instructor using different evaluation methods for the same project created an ethical dilemma for the students.	41%	41%	8%	8%	2%
5. The students were properly informed about the outcome/evaluation of the project.	0%	12%	12%	43%	33%
6. The students were aware of their team composition or membership.	3%	16%	11%	48%	22%
7. Groups should be more compatible. (i.e., same class, similar schedule)	48%	34%	14%	3%	1%
8. Changing the outcome in mid-stream (from a paper to a wiki page) caused additional problems for students.	2%	3%	7%	22%	66%
9. Organizing and working in a group where members have different commitments and interests create an ethical dilemma among the students.	30%	37%	18%	13%	2%
10. There were communications problems among the students.	64%	27%	7%	2%	0%
11. There were coordination/communication problems between the instructors.	52%	37%	7%	3%	1%
12. Lack of knowledge lead to uncertainty	44%	38%	14%	3%	1%
13. Uncertainty lead to lack of interest	37%	43%	16%	2%	2%
14. Lack of interest lead to lack of participation	44%	41%	12%	3%	0%
15. Overall this project created an ethical dilemma among students.	49%	40%	7%	3%	1%
16. Overall this was an excellent project.	2%	3%	5%	15%	75%

Number 6 asked about the awareness of the student groups, 48 percent of the students disagreed that the groups were aware of who was in their group, while 22 percent strongly disagreed that the groups were aware of the actual composition or make up of the classes. Uncertainty was created with the students not having an opportunity to meet their group members, nor even being aware of individual group member's commitments to other projects. Question 7 follows up asking if the groups should be more compatible, with 48 percent of the students strongly agreeing that they should be and 34 percent having a general agreement that the groups should be more compatible. Working together toward a common goal with group members and an awareness of their other commitments to project, personal situations, etc., would make for a less stressful environment. In number 9, students having different

interests and commitments tend to create an ethical dilemma as indicated by a total of 67 percent of the students. What might this ethical dilemma be? In the case of Cindy, she had another project due, leaving the remaining students to either do the work without her or wait on her to finish, which causes less time to do a thorough and satisfactory job. In this situation, they allowed Cindy to finish her previous project and contribute little to this project. As many students would say, she basically got a “free ride”, and assuming that her teacher assigned a grade to the project, that would most likely mean a very good score. Certainly, some preventative measures should be taken on the part of the teachers to prevent this type of inequality from occurring; however, in the actual case it was not prevented by the teachers, which created more frustration and hostility for those who actually did the majority of the work.

Questions, 12-15, basically summarize the issues that result that can create an unethical dilemma for students. Question 12 shows that 44 percent of the students strongly agree and 38 percent agree that a lack of knowledge leads to uncertainty. This statement is followed with “uncertainty leads to a lack of interest”, whereby 37 percent strongly agree and 43 percent agree. Question 14 indicates that a lack of interest leads to a lack of participation, with 44 percent strongly agreeing and 41 percent agreeing. Obviously the student with the other project felt that this particular project was not of significant enough interest (or relevance) for her to participate.

An overall ethical dilemma was indicated by the students in question 15. Overwhelmingly 49 percent strongly agreed with 40 percent agreeing to this statement. What would be interesting as a follow up would be to conduct a qualitative questionnaire to determine exactly what type of ethical dilemma the students believed occurred. Obviously, the authors have “filled in the gaps” with their assumption of Cindy receiving a grade which she did not earn.

What is interesting in the analysis is question number 8 which asked if changing the outcome in mid-stream to a wiki page was appropriate for the students? Sixty six percent of the students indicated a strong disagreement that this was a problem, whereby 22 percent indicated disagreement that this was a problem. The authors contend that perhaps the students did not fully understand this question. As all three authors are instructors and realize that changing the requirements of a course at the “eleventh” hour, would clearly indicate a confusing, problematic situation. For example, in this case, the group had already produced a 50 page paper with a tremendous amount of time and work effort going into the output. Now, the students had to learn a new program and how to use it within a week of the project being due. Had this been the assignment in the beginning, it appears, it would have been less stressful than producing a paper. Also, what about the paper? Did the teachers still want it? Although that question was not answered in the case, in truth some teachers still wanted it, while the paper was irrelevant to others.

CONCLUSION

The final question is a catalyst for the conclusion of the project. Overall was this an excellent project. Only 5 percent of the students believed it to be, with 90 percent either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. Obviously, the project had significant flaws, possibly from the learning curve that the teachers experienced. Another possibility for the project being presented in such a manner was that the instructors were themselves gathering data for a paper presentation. Perhaps the project was designed to be vague and confusing to determine the behavior that would result from the students. However, this type of project would definitely not be suitable in an undergraduate setting.

So, what are some suggestions for instructors in assigning projects to students in a group setting? Obviously communication is a must for both instructors and students. Communication is actually three-way in this situation: instructor to instructor, instructor to student, and student to student. A subsequent paper by the authors will analyze this aspect in further detail.

Secondly, conflict arose within the group that the instructors handled in various ways. Sally’s instructor preferred to ignore the conflict and allow the students to handle it. This measure works up to a point and allows others to learn conflict management. Coombs (1998) addresses the fact that the “nature of the conflict at hand” should be considered. He contends that if it is a “dispute between individuals rather than a collision between two large cultural groups, liberalism may be the best theory to adopt.” However, Sally appeared to have reached a point where students were finally joining the group after the assignment was completed. This created a dilemma of

unfairness and inequity. The instructor actually moved one student to another group that could accommodate her. However, three students who had not contributed to the project remained with the original group. They were actually in another class and could not be easily moved, so they were given a minimal amount of work to contribute. Yet, Cindy's contribution was so minimal that it constituted virtually no contribution, much to the dismay of the other members. While not mentioned within the case, further conflict arose between Sally and her instructor because of the issue of Cindy's lack of contribution. Unfortunately, Sally did not choose the best forum for this confrontation, which happened within the regular classroom setting, which ironically was an ethic's class. This poor judgment on her part led to the instructor becoming defensive and asking the question, "Well, what does it matter to you?" The response he received from Sally was two-fold. She first indicated that the group was assigned to produce a product, a paper, and not all parties contributed to that product, yet received credit for the group's work, thus creating an ethical dilemma for the group. The instructor responded that it was not a product they were producing but a process of learning. Sally concurred that "yes, this learning is important, yet as an instructor herself, she would not put her students in such an unethical dilemma." With a shrug, the subject was dismissed by the instructor, yet Sally and her group ultimately received an "A" on the project. In retrospect, a word of caution to students is that they should speak with their instructors privately about such matters as "putting them on the spot" in front of other students will not build a good rapport with their professors. Subsequently, Sally has experienced further difficulty with this instructor in other courses, possibly because of her poor choice of venues for discussion of the project.

Unfortunately, it appears obvious that the instructor did not have proper training to deal with the ethical dilemma he and the other teachers created. Training to become a college professor does not include proper pedagogical education. According to Coombs 1998 article "Educational ethics: Are we on the right track?", suggestions that would have been beneficial to the instructor would be:

- 1) Identify alternative responses and their consequences
- 2) Determine information crucial to the ethical response needed
- 3) Apply principles such as a) what bears on the problem, b) is an intuitive judgment needed, c) identify options and determine consequences, d) interpret and adapt to the problem
- 4) Develop principles specific to the case
- 5) Identify the ethical issues
- 6) Build ethical arguments that support responses to the situation
- 7) Determine what course of action is justified

It is the opinion of the author that using these guidelines prior to the case being assigned would have modified the assignment to make it less stressful and less of an ethical dilemma for the students.

Suggestions for students in maintaining their mental health while dealing with stressful situations are as follows:

- 1) Talk over any problems concerning health, social adjustment, or emotional stability with a counselor, physician, friend, or in this case, instructor.
- 2) Identify causes of stress: a) physical health issues, b) school related scheduling such as inadequate study times, c) excessive social activities and commitments
- 3) Practice controlling emotions and avoid seeking immediate gratification.
- 4) Develop a sense of humor
- 5) Keep ambitions and actual performance in balance
- 6) Realize that minor conflicts during those initial months of being away from family may cause resentments and periods of disloyalty.
- 7) Seek approval from those whose opinions you value, friends, teachers.
- 8) Choose a vocation that is of interest to you and "fits" your nature. (Patry, 1935)

In conclusion, it appears that the solutions to ethical issues that arise from times of stress are both physical and mental. From an instructor's standpoint, careful communication and planning of group assignments and weighing the consequences of those assignments on a social and ethical scale are essential. From the student's standpoint, caring for one's physical condition is paramount in being able to complete an assignment. Obviously,

proper rest and nutrition, with a healthy balance of social time will reduce stress and conflict that may arise from school related assignments. Time management strategies, while not previously addressed, will help in reducing stress caused by multiple assignments being due at one time. A calendar or planner would be essential for time management. Finally, being diplomatic in handling communication issues between students and with instructors is paramount. Proper timing of responses and tone of dialogue will reduce friction between individuals. Additionally, it is the author's belief that ethics and morality can be better taught by proper modeling by instructors. Part of this modeling is an understanding of the student's environment and demands being placed on them. As Lacina (2001) stressed, "Moral education is a growing concern in the field of education. The right of schools to decide what to stress must be decided by the entire schools community. This should include the school board, administrators, teachers, and parents."

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